

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 149 456

EA 010 273

AUTHOR Fredrickson, John H.
 TITLE Must Declining Enrollment Mean Closing Schools?
 PUB DATE Apr 78
 NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National School Boards Association (38th, Anaheim, California, April 1-4, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Building Innovation; Community Surveys; Curriculum Development; *Declining Enrollment; Economic Development; Educational Specifications; Elementary Secondary Education; Enrollment Projections; Facility Requirements; Federal Legislation; *Master Plans; *School Closing; *School Community Relationship; *School Planning; Space Utilization

ABSTRACT

Effective long-range planning by school districts is an imperative in dealing with declining enrollments. School districts should (1) evaluate present programs in light of current statutory regulations and educational trends and innovations; (2) appraise the structural qualities of existing school facilities; (3) conduct communitywide surveys to determine the economic growth potential; (4) conduct annual preschool censuses and districtwide enrollment projections; (5) prepare for possible purchase, lease, or sale of school sites and buildings; (6) investigate modern architectural innovations; (7) develop educational specifications for future projects; and (8) develop an ongoing public dissemination program of the school district's activities and objectives. After taking these steps, existing surplus space can be considered in terms of how it might be affected by recent federal legislation; whether it can be adapted or utilized to suit future educational activities; or finally, leased or sold to other educational and noneducational agencies. (Author/MLF)

 * Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
 * from the original document. *

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

MUST DECLINING ENROLLMENT MEAN CLOSING SCHOOLS?

By

DR. JOHN H. FREDRICKSON
School Facilities Consultant
Middleton, Wisconsin

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

John H. Fredrickson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND
USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED149456

The trend in many school districts throughout our nation during the Seventies has been declining enrollments, or at the very least the stabilizing of enrollments. And the trend is likely to continue into the early Eighties. This situation was brought about by a number of factors: the end of the "baby-boom" generation of students, the women's liberation movement, improved methods and greater utilization of contraception, postponement of marriage, postponement of childbearing after marriage, smaller families, and the general economic outlook.

Long-Range Planning

Today, perhaps more than ever before, effective long-range planning for all school districts is an imperative. While just a short time ago schools were often overcrowded, necessitating double sessions and the curtailment of programs, many of these same facilities now have empty rooms. Some districts even have empty schools. Therefore, the question is, what should be done with these partially used or unused school facilities? "Must declining enrollment mean closing schools?"

To begin, this period of enrollment decline or stabilization should be seen as an ideal time for review and re-evaluation of our present programs and facilities, as well as an opportunity for serious long-range planning for the future. That is to say, the times seem both to justify and require more and better educational planning.

But how should such "effective long-range planning" be approached? First, aside from whatever the current enrollment trend may be, the major objective of educational planning must be the improvement of the curriculum and its delivery system in order to keep pace with the

EA 010 273

demands of our ever-changing, technological society. And this cannot be achieved without the creation of a "master plan," which is a comprehensive statement of the long-range goals of a school district, together with a specific strategy for their implementation in the future.

Master Plan

To develop an appropriate master plan, the following steps are advocated:

1. Review and evaluate present programs and practices in light of current statutory regulations, and trends and innovations in education, at both the state and national levels.

Every school district should develop a definite procedure for keeping abreast of new legislation and new concepts in education. This can be accomplished by having each department, discipline or grade level, under the supervision of a curriculum coordinator, maintain and update a file of professional materials from state and national agencies and publications, and by regular attendance, on a rotational basis, at educational conferences, seminars and workshops.

2. Examine and appraise existing school facilities and sites in terms of their structural abilities to accommodate curricular change.

Along with school district personnel, outside experts such as architects, mechanical engineers and educational consultants should be engaged to do in-depth inspections and analyses of present school facilities and sites in order to ascertain their structural integrity and their adaptability to support new programs and activities.

3. Conduct community-wide surveys to determine the economic growth potential and its resultant impact on local education in the future.

Since school districts should never expect to function in a vacuum, frequent surveys of area businesses and industries are essential to discover what effect any expansion, decline or change of thrust of the

local commerce might have on the population-at-large and the curriculum demand in general.

4. Conduct annual preschool censuses and district-wide enrollment projections for comparison and evaluation.

Together with the data secured from the surveys just mentioned, yearly preschool tabulations and enrollment predictions are imperative for effective long-range planning. By keeping accurate records of the number of children of preschool age, both births and immigration, and continually updating district enrollment histories, school officials can more easily plan for and accommodate future school populations.

5. Prepare for possible purchase, lease or sale of school sites and school buildings.

With the information regarding potential economic growth or decline, preschool censuses and actual enrollment projections, school districts should take note of housing and business patterns and pinpoint sites and schools for possible action. By doing this well in advance of need, decision-makers can better anticipate growth or decline and reduce land or site speculation problems in the future.

6. Investigate modern architectural forms, construction methods and building materials.

In the coming decades, we can expect to see significant changes in school shapes and textures, both external and internal. No longer will school planners and architects be limited to the conventional geometric configurations of the past or the traditional building materials of brick, stone and mortar. School districts should make every effort to be aware of these design and construction advances.

7. Develop educational specifications for future projects - renovation, additions, new construction.

Educational specifications are the detailed, written documents en-

abling a school architect to design durable, functional and adaptable school facilities. The development of this material, necessary for renovation as well as new construction, should be a collective undertaking of staff, students, citizens and consultants.

8. Develop an ongoing public dissemination program of the school district's activities and objectives.

One of the major reasons for public rejection of school district requests for funding of educational change and facilities has been the lack of convincing information. It is important to make a visible effort to keep the public apprised of the progress and direction of the local schools and to solicit and acknowledge the community's educational expectations.

(It must be stressed here that carrying out the eight steps just listed and developing a master plan predicated on long-range goals, are no mean tasks and will involve significant numbers of individuals and months of discussion, research, visitation and writing.)

Implementation Strategy

Having executed the above steps, how is the master plan applied to the problem of space surplus caused by declining enrollments? Assuming a genuine commitment to educational improvement, the following questions should be considered:

1. How might present surplus space be affected by recent federal legislation?
2. How can present surplus space be utilized efficiently for other educationally oriented activities?
3. How can present surplus space be adapted effectively to suit future educational requirements and clientele?
4. How can present surplus space be leased or sold to other educational and non-educational agencies?

First, in recent years several pieces of federal legislation have been enacted and compliance dates set which could have an impact on the use of surplus space. These laws are: the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX - Prohibition of Sex Discrimination in Education), Section 504 of Public Law 93-112 of 1973 (Accessibility - Rehabilitation Act), Public Law 94-142 of 1975 (Education for All Handicapped Children Act), and Public Law 94-482 (Vocational Amendments of 1976).

Each of these Acts requires attention be given to specific constituencies and each has potentially significant space ramifications. While all school officials are acquainted with these legislative mandates and have undoubtedly initiated some sort of compliance action, it would be wise for school districts having surplus space to re-evaluate it in terms of fulfilling the demanding requirements of these laws.

Second, while some surplus space can be expected to lend itself satisfactorily to the fulfillment of the above-mentioned legislation, some may be, by nature, unsuitable without major modification. Such space can and should be considered for use as sites for alternative education programs; daycare centers; preschool; night school; community centers; district administrative offices and even as temporary housing for classes while other sites are being remodeled or renovated. The key factors in making these decisions will be the type, size, condition and location of the surplus space.

Third, even though a school district may possess surplus space at the moment, the need for space to accommodate curricular expansion in the future should not be overlooked. Also, school districts must not ignore (as they did in the past) the warnings of many demographers who are now predicting another upturn in school populations beginning in the mid-Eighties and peaking in the mid-Nineties. While this applies mainly to elementary facilities, eventually it will be district-wide.

Fourth, most school officials and their Boards are loath to relinquish possession or control of existing school facilities. This is a natural reaction, recognizing that it had often been a struggle originally in many districts to obtain those facilities. However, assuming that the present surplus space need not be used for federal legislation compliance, cannot be used efficiently for other educationally oriented activities, and cannot be modified effectively for future educational requirements and clientele, the matter becomes one of deciding how to dispose of excess space.

Once again, because of the understandable reluctance of school districts to divest themselves of hard won facilities, the first solution is to lease the properties to other public or private agencies with the agreement that the facilities will revert to the local district, should the need for them arise.

In the event that the master plan, reinforced by the answers to the previous questions, indicates no further need for the present surplus space, the final solution is to sell the property to whatever agency, organization or business that can function within the zoning regulations governing the site or sites.

Summary

Rarely have school districts had the opportunity for an in-depth examination of themselves as the times now afford. Having followed the steps and implemented the strategy as outlined in this paper, the question, "must declining enrollment mean closing schools?" should be answerable. In most cases the answer will be "no." In any event, effective long-range planning must become the hallmark of all school districts as they begin to prepare for the 21st Century.